

# TO REMEMBER HIM BY

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“Fiona,” Aaron’s voice calls through the door. He knocks louder, more urgently. “Fiona, please. Open the door.”

I take tentative steps forward, and he goes quiet on the other side of the door. When I get there, I peer through the peephole. Aaron, pulled into a caricature of himself by the concave lens, his nose and forehead bulging, his receding hairline receding more drastically, is frowning at the doorknob in concern, his ear turned to the door. His hand hovers to the side of the peephole, ready to knock again.

“I saw your light on,” he says, not so loudly. He senses me close.

I unlock the door and let it fall open, quickly bringing my right arm back up to clutch the left across my chest and obscure not only my naked breasts but the rectangle of gauze between them also. Aaron’s eyes widen and he whispers, “Jesus,” stepping in hurriedly so that he can shut the door behind him. I’m not wearing a thing.

“What if there was someone else in the hallway?”

“There wasn’t,” I say and realize I’m shivering, almost chattering.

“Your lips are blue,” he says. He puts a large, warm hand on my shoulder and leads me to my bed. When he’s seated me, he crouches to dig through the pile of clothes at the foot of the bed. He pulls out a T-shirt and a pair of pyjama pants and hands them up. While he turns back to the pile to find some additional items, I quickly pull the T-shirt over my head, hoping he won’t glimpse the bandage that covers my new tattoo.

“Put this on, too,” he says, retrieving a knitted pullover from the bottom of the pile. I obey. As I tug it over my head, I inhale the musty scent of accumulated sweat, cigarette smoke, and pollution absorbed and gone stale beneath the rest of my dirty clothes. He hands me a pair of already worn socks, too, knowing better than to check the drawer for clean ones.

“You can’t shut me out like this,” he says, and I look down to discover that tears are running down his cheeks. He’s kneeling at my feet. His large hands, spread across his thighs, prop him up.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I feel my face crumpling, reddening in splotches to mirror his.

He moves his hands up and places them on my knees. “I’ve been so worried. When’s the last time you ate?”

“I just needed—I need to be by myself.”

“I can’t leave you alone,” he says. “I finally got into the building.”

His hands weigh down on me. I imagine their heaviness giving me varicose veins, forcing fragile inner pathways into tortuous, unsightly

markings that will blaze through my skin and form another tattoo to commemorate the occasion. I wish I'd left him in the hallway. I wish I could have ignored his knock and his voice the way I could my cell's ringtone or the front-door buzzer.

He's waiting for something from me, but tears are streaming down my face and I'm afraid of how my voice will crack if I try to speak.

"You're still shivering," he says. He climbs to his feet, using my knees for support. "I'll put on some tea."

I watch him in the kitchen as he tries to locate what he needs. I've done nothing to create distinct spaces in this apartment; sitting on my bed, I am feet away from the counter he's scouring, the drawers he pulls open. I've stacked bowls on my dresser and draped my housecoat over the counter. Aaron opens every cupboard before he turns and asks, "Do you . . . Where's your kettle?"

I remain mute, shake my head slightly.

"A pot?"

I nod and continue to watch, unhelpfully, as he assembles everything he needs. He finds a pot, fills it under the faucet, and puts it on the stove. He pulls out four boxes of tea and looks at them for a minute before selecting a chamomile without asking for input. He leans against the counter and stares at the stove. Neither of us says a word as he waits for the water to boil.

My muscles are tense, like guitar strings ready to ring out some sharp and desperate chord. But I'm no longer shivering.

Aaron lets the pot come to a full boil before removing it from the element. Once the water has calmed, he drops the teabag into the pot, stirs it with a wooden spoon. It looks like he's making soup. With an accidental flourish, he scoops the teabag out, then carefully pours the concoction into my last clean mug.

He carries the steaming mug past me and places it on my bedside table, setting it beside a photo of Malik, the one I showed the tattoo artist. I've propped it there against my lamp. He hesitates for a moment before turning back to me.

He's seen the photo before, and another one that's tacked to the wall behind the dresser, me and Malik kissing in front of an orange and green two-man tent, a shot taken at arm's length. Twenty-four photos from the disposable camera Malik and I picked up at a weathered, rarely patronized gas station on our California trip lie in wait for Aaron throughout my apartment, ready to ambush him any time he opens a drawer or looks too closely at a cluttered table or counter. This is not new. Malik

haunted my apartment even while he was still living and breathing apart from me.

I've never been one to keep mum about past lovers. Malik himself had to listen to stories about the men I'd twisted myself around before him. I have no doubt that the pictures and the old T-shirts, more than my messiness or the lack of amenities in my studio, are why Aaron nearly always coaxes me back to his place.

Not wanting to get between me and Malik, or me and the tea he's just made, Aaron takes a spot at the foot of the bed. I scoot closer to the bedside table to make room. We haven't spoken for almost ten minutes. The dilated silence fills me with dread. I don't want to cry again, and I know that if I have to speak, I probably will.

"What happened to him?" he finally asks. I don't respond at first, so he tries again: "This is about Malik, right?"

I stretch for the tea and hold it in my lap for a moment before thinking better of it. I'm shaking as I consider how to answer Aaron, and the ceramic mug has already turned my hands pink. I place it back on the table.

"What happened?" He places a hand softly on my shoulder blade.

"He's . . . he . . ."

With his impossibly large hand, thumb to pinkie seeming to span my whole side, Aaron pulls me in. I let myself fall into his lap, bringing my feet up onto the bed. My small breasts sag floorwards, and I feel a slight twinge of discomfort as the bandage wrinkles in response to the new position. I'm sobbing now as Aaron runs his thick fingers through my hair, saying nothing, asking nothing.

How can I repeat the story Janna told me. My old high-school friend cried as she broke the news, and yet the way she went on and on meting out details—she cared more about being the one telling than she did about how her news gutted me and blasted my world to splinters. She talked about how shocked and heartbroken everyone we knew had been, as if that could matter. I hung up, finally, unable to listen to more of her stupid, brutal words.

Malik and I once discussed our preferred methods for committing suicide, as dark and damaged people sometimes do. I would slit my wrist in the bathtub, I said, an act I thought beautifully gruesome. Malik would use a gun, but he wouldn't blow his brains out. He'd go for the heart, like Count Vronsky in *Anna Karenina*. Only, he wouldn't miss.

"But then you have to get a gun," I'd said. "It requires forethought. Knives and razor blades are there whenever you feel particularly down."

“True, but—and I’m sorry to sound sexist—I see wrist-cutting as an exceedingly feminine way to off oneself.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Can’t help it. I want to go in a really manly way.”

“Practically speaking, the gun has its disadvantages.”

“Well, sure. But it’s pretty romantic.”

“You’re so fucked up!” I laughed and snuggled into the hollow at his collarbone. “You’re so fucked up.”

Ultimately, the bold romantic or masculine gesture didn’t really matter. Malik killed himself in his mother’s garage, sitting in the same old Jetta that had rocketed us through the Mojave Desert (or so I imagine it), the windows rolled down not to create a cooling wind, but to let in the exhaust he chose to poison himself with. Anita, his mother, found him in the running car when she got home from work. None of the neighbours had noticed or thought anything of the pained drone of the Jetta’s aging engine or the thin trickle of exhaust slipping out underneath the wide steel door.

Malik didn’t leave a note. Of course he didn’t leave a note.

And now Aaron wants to know why I’ve banished him, why I’ve changed my Facebook profile picture and let my phone fill up with unheard messages. He wants to know why he found me naked and shivering in my apartment once some neighbour finally, kindly or irresponsibly, took pity on him and let him circumvent my unheeded buzzer. He knows that I’m reckless, that I’ll only return his care with pain. I’ve shown him as much from the start. But here he is, stroking my hair.

My sobs ease up, and I start to feel soothed. I’ve pushed my tears into Aaron’s lap and soaked them up with my sleeve. I don’t want to stop hurting and freezing and regretting, but his attempts to comfort neutralize me. Finally I manage to squeak, “He killed himself.”

“Oh my god,” Aaron whispers.

My tears have ebbed, and when I stop feeling the tug in my chest, I sit upright. I look on his face again. Crumpled blankets form a soft ridge between us, a minor barrier. His eyes are dark beacons, ushering me out of my own storm.

“Aaron—”

“Why don’t you try to have a sip of tea?”

“I can’t. I’m warm now.”

He reaches out to pull me towards him again. I lean away, and his hand falls softly on the hill of blankets. He waits, puzzled but patient.

I clutch the bottom of my sweater and the T-shirt beneath it. I hav-

en’t decided to do this, I’m just doing it. My arms are pulling the material upwards, back over my head. “Fiona,” Aaron protests while my head is in the cave of my shirts. With a final tug, I set myself free and toss the shirts beside the dresser.

I face him again. His eyes meet mine for a moment before they drop to my chest. His eyebrows constrict, just a bit.

“What is it?” he asks.

I peel the gauze from my chest, as I was doing just before he knocked at my door. The tape gives a little more easily now, as I expose the red, raised skin and the new lines that mark my body.

I keep my eyes trained on Aaron’s face to read his reaction. He’s looking at a pair of parted lips, permanently etched on my body. It had seemed like a fitting tribute to Malik’s memory in the tattoo parlour, discussing it with the artist, and even afterwards, when I first laid eyes on the fresh ink of the finished work. Almost two years have passed since Malik last pressed his lips to the flat valley between my breasts but that’s how I wanted to remember him.

However, ink has started to weep from the neglected wound, and the lips, displaced from Malik’s face, now look like a monstrous second mouth. When crumbs tumble down my top, this new body part will gobble them up. In a fresh and terrible fantasy, the mouth mouths, “Feed me,” looking like a lipstickless version of the mouth that delivers the opening number in *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I’d imagined I was making some profound and important gesture, but it was a confused, flailing attempt to make meaning out of what’s meaningless, a failure to turn back time.

Aaron’s eyebrows relax, the frown of incomprehension melting into a sad smile. “This is for him,” he states.

I want him to yell at me, or to cry again. I’ve tattooed myself to put another man between us. I’ve permanently marked myself with a symbol to disrupt and destroy our most intimate moments.

“Okay,” he says after a beat.

“What do you mean, okay? I’m not asking your permission. It’s done.”

“I know,” he says. He waits. He never falls to my combativeness. “I can’t know what you’re going through, but I think I can understand why you would want something like that.”

“Why? Why would I want to put this stupid mouth on myself?”

“We’ve all lost people. You want to hold onto the memory, honour the—”

“He wasn’t ‘people,’” I spit. He bows his head briefly, and suddenly his patience tastes much more like patronization. “I’ll never love you the way I loved him.”

I watch a muscle jump along his jaw as he clenches his teeth. For a passing second I believe I’ve succeeded in angering him. But then his jaw relaxes. “I wouldn’t want you to,” he says.

This revelation jolts me out of my self-pity. Aaron wouldn’t want my desperate, raging love. He isn’t envious of what Malik and I shared; it doesn’t threaten him.

I’m already growing cold again. Goosebumps come up over my skin in waves. Aaron notices and stands, taking a step toward the shirts I threw at the dresser.

“Stop,” I say. “I don’t want to be taken care of.”

He sighs and lets the arm that was reaching out for the shirts fall.

“I love you,” he says, turning back to me. “Tell me what you want from me right now.”

“Let me be alone. Let me take care of myself.”

“I’ll go. I can go. But I’m worried. It’s not that I don’t trust you to take care of yourself. It’s just . . . I just . . .”

“When you’re here, I stop thinking about him. He just killed himself, and I’m sitting here thinking about myself.”

He’s biting his tongue, I think, though I don’t know what he’s preventing himself from saying. Still standing, looming, between me and the dresser, he finally dips his head, nodding to himself as he makes a decision.

“Could you please plug in your phone?” he asks. “Erase the messages so that even if you don’t pick up I can feel like I’m getting through in some way?”

I wish I was wearing the shirt, now. I’m cold and exposed and I need him to leave. I shrug.

“Call me anytime. Middle of the night, middle of the workday, I don’t care. I’ll bring you food. I’ll do anything you need.”

I nod to hurry him along.

“I can’t help being worried, Fiona. I want to let you have your time, but I can’t help it. If I don’t hear from you soon, if you don’t let me in—”

“I’ll let you in. Give me time.”

He glances at the mug of tea, or the picture of Malik, and I watch him refrain, again, from saying something. He turns and walks away. I don’t get up from the bed as he opens the front door and lets himself out.

And just like that, I’m alone again. I hear Aaron retreat down the hall. Relief and regret spill over me together. I’ve made my drastic gesture. I’ve shown Aaron that he comes second, at best. The elevator dings, and I listen to the ancient doors squeal open.

I pick up the shirts, pull them over my head, and sit back in my bed, propped up by pillows. With a sniff, I take the mug in one hand, the photo of Malik in the other. He’s smiling, and I remember, sometimes we were happy. Sometimes it was easy, like Aaron would have things with us.

Through the shirts, I finger the spot where Malik’s supposed to be kissing me. This is where I blasted a hole in myself and missed my mark. I’ll savour the tenderness, the pain, while it lasts.